

# The Catharine Osgood Foster Memorial Luncheon

October 3, 1998

*On Saturday, October 3, at noon, in the Deane Carriage Barn, there was a luncheon to honor Catharine Osgood Foster. It was Reunion Saturday and some alumnae were here specifically for that occasion. This booklet contains reprints of the speeches given at the luncheon so that the words spoken in honor of Kit will be available to those who wish to hear them, either again or for the first time, and as a document filed permanently in the Catharine Osgood Foster archive.*

## CAROLYN CROSSETT ROWLAND ('37)

Good afternoon and welcome.

First of all, let me say "thank you" to Trustees, alumnae, faculty and guests for coming to this special occasion. I am honored to have been asked by President Coleman to be your host, and as such, want to offer thanks from all of us to all who made this luncheon possible.

I want especially to welcome our honored guests: Thomas Foster, Reverend and Mrs. Fred Buechner, Mrs. Peggy Worthington, Mrs. Anne Gatling, Mr. and Mrs. Arnold Rieks, Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Burkhardt. All were very close friends of Kit's and we are so pleased that they could be with us.

Our reason for being here today is to remember Kit Osgood Foster, to honor her, to testify to the lasting influence she has had on all who knew her and to express gratitude for her friendship. Two and a half years ago, I spoke as follows at the evening meeting here at the College, announcing the establishment of the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair for Distinguished Teaching:

"Catharine Osgood Foster represents the very essence of Bennington. She was an inspired and inspiring teacher, giving students the courage to experiment, to fail, to try again, and, thus, earn the opportunity to find and know themselves. There are hundreds of Bennington students, who can testify that no one - no one influenced more of us than did Kit. She was a teacher beyond compare, and we owe her thanks for asking our best and for always being accepting of our efforts."

Now, we will hear from two other Bennington alumnae who wished to speak today. Unfortunately, Eleanor Rockwell Edelstein could not come at the last minute, but Rebecca Stickney will read her remarks, followed by Mary Shaw Schlivek. After that Mary Oliver, holder of the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair, will speak and finally, President Coleman, a close friend of Kit's, who had the extraordinary experience of having Kit as a student in several of her Shakespeare classes.

## ELEANOR ROCKWELL EDELSTEIN ('47)

When I entered Bennington in 1943, I was already a published writer. That is, I had poems and stories printed in our high school literary magazine. I was also a journalist, which is to say that I had been keeping journals and diaries from about the age of ten. In addition, I thought I knew a great deal about Bennington College. I had been preceded in this wonderful place by two family members, a sister-in-law and a brother — and incidentally, I was fol-



lowed by four nieces and a son. Before I was a student here, I had visited on many occasions, attending parties, plays and dance recitals. I never applied to any other college.

As I recall, my goal in 1943 was to attend Bennington for the Experience, with a capital "E." I saw myself as a kind of writer-in-residence. Speak of chutzpah and naivete!

And then came the Awakening. I found myself enrolled in Kit Foster's Language and Literature course, designed for freshman. In fact, my transcript indicates that I took this course two years in a row, or for two semesters. I know I did not fail the first time around so my transcript is a mystery. But I clearly remember the first week of class. Kit assigned us *Oedipus Rex*. Pow! We weren't in Kansas any more. This guy murders his father, marries his mother, and then blinds himself! Kit certainly had gotten my attention, and she kept it for more than fifty years. After *Oedipus*, things calmed down a bit. I do not remember all of our assignments, but I know that we read Joyce, Dostoevsky, Henry James, Thomas Mann, Ibsen, and a great deal more. Later, I took Kit's Shakespeare course.

At Bennington I had the privilege of studying with a dozen luminaries of the contemporary literary world, but it was Kit who initially, and constantly, made me see that if I wanted to be a writer, I had better learn to read — really read — and to learn from the masters. And I had better start really writing. Have all of you seen Henry James' published notebooks, in which there is page after page of potential titles for future work, and pages of names of characters, none of which he ever used? Fortunately, I saw those notebooks long after I left Bennington, because that kind of doodling was right up my alley until Kit got ahold of me.

Anyway, two things happened, so many years ago. While it is true that I do a certain amount of writing, I do not consider myself primarily a writer. I became, eventually, a cultural anthropologist and teacher; always a story teller. Bennington and Kit nurtured at least three real writers. Julia Randall, Ba Moore Clarkson and Mary Oliver come immediately to mind. But as importantly, Kit became my friend. I did not see her, or Tommy, as often as I would have liked, but she was always here on my returns to the College. As I wrote after Kit's death, at Bennington, to paraphrase Gertrude Stein, 'Kit was the there, there.' She welcomed us, she encouraged us, always putting our adventures, and misadventures, into focus. And we corresponded. The last long letter I had from Kit was written in the summer of 1996. She had been re-reading some of my stuff which I had sent to her, and she complimented me on my clear, calm prose. She didn't mention that, if true, she had taught me that. She did mention that she was working on an essay about her teaching career at Bennington — an incredible 31 years — and her delight that, quote, "that excellent woman and poet Mary Oliver," unquote, would be the first occupant of the Catharine Osgood Foster Chair at Bennington.

I would like to digress for a moment, and try to describe my picture of Kit for those who may not have met her or studied with her. Comfortable is the first word that comes to mind, and I think her comfortable physical appearance reflected a 'confident' inner life. She could surprise us, but we were hard put to surprise her. When consulted, there was her smile, the thoughtful pause, and then a bullseye comment and a chuckle. But with that mysterious turban on her head, I think she knew us better than we knew ourselves, and she sent us on our way, literate and blessed.

The last time I saw Kit was a year ago, in September 1997. I went to visit her in the nursing home, and was immediately greeted by that wonderful smile and the voice that never seemed to age. I knew from her letter, and from Tom, that she had begun to lose her eyesight, so I was not totally surprised that Kit had, apparently, not noticed from her bed, that her room was full of bees. Somehow, her window screen had come loose and a dozen bees were flying around in the sunlight. I found a maintenance man, who swooshed the bees out and then fixed the broken screen. I told Kit what was going on, and she just laughed. She seemed delighted by all her unexpected visitors, and expressed no fear of being stung — or upstaged. Same Old Kit.

I have thought about that visit a lot. It seems to me that there may be parallels between a room full of bees and a dozen adolescents in Booth House living room, all a-buzz about their dubious writing histories and dreams of writing the Great American Novel. But bees and students were no threat to Kit's talents and wisdom; they were welcome. She was the consummate teacher, and in teaching us what growing up and life-long learning was all about, she set the standard for what we *could* become. She remains the here, here.

## MARY SHAW SCHLIVEK ('37)

I want to say a few words about how I learned about Catharine Osgood Foster's teaching. Kit came to teach literature at Bennington during my student years in the thirties. but our paths did not cross. Fortunately the forties brought a second chance when Lewis Webster Jones hired me as secretary to the faculty in literature. Kit Foster was to be my work advisor, to help me get the lay of the land, Perhaps find me if I got lost. I was to go to her with any questions.



Kit must have seen right away that there were going to be a lot of questions. She could tell that being a secretary was a front, that I was really still just a student, as green as any freshman despite an MA, a craven alumna, sore from first job failure, creeping back to the Bennington nest for further counsel. She did not hesitate. Out of sheer generosity she became my friend and took me on as counselee, enrolling me, as it were, for a four-year course in fellow morality.

No curriculum, no classes, no tutorials, not even a formal reading list. But for those four years almost daily clarion greetings—the literature office in the Barn was a port of call for Kit—and each “Good Morning” seemed to create the present tense on that day. We were both anxious mother hens about the welfare and good behavior of the College, with frequent shoptalks, general fat-chewing, laughter and tut-tutting, comparing of notes, meetings of minds, sometimes distress calls responded to, pickings-up off the floor. And Kit put up with my despairing questions about life, my endless self-recriminations. What makes me so unwilling to stop dragging my heels? Why am I so unready and so timorous? Why do I feel so unworthy of my own good fortune? She countered with other downright questions, perhaps equally unanswerable. Bit by bit she levered me into asking different questions myself, and into a permanent change of expectation about answers.

All time with Kit was quality time. Every encounter counted. Give-and-take was actually given, actually taken. Kit paid attention and expected attention. She delivered just weight. If I demanded panaceas, and rules of right, talismanic wisdom nuggets, she offered saltier advice, such as the quote “Life is like learning to play the violin on the concert stage.” She was good at turning tables, shaking down to earth.

I will cite a single instance. Once I was in full career deriding some now-forgotten verbal sloppiness overheard. I waxed censorious and scornful about any mind that could let such laxness go untightened, could allow so much potential meaning to go unstressed. Kit said to me, “But aren’t you curious about that other mind, wouldn’t you be fascinated to know what that mind, albeit in its error, is actually feeling?” That brought me up short, empty. Of course not. What an appalling notion. A contamination. Every instinct rebelled. I would be scrambling to put up walls, to be in full flight from such other mind. The strength of my own reaction brought me up short again. I saw that I had already put up walls, that I was in full flight from other minds all the time. I saw that my very defenses were probably acts of willful aggression, and that my presumed fastidious concern for the language was an alibi, an excuse for remaining aloof. I also saw that Kit herself in her charity was curious about, was fascinated with, was willing to learn from other minds, however errant, maybe even narrow, arrogant minds like mine at that moment, and that she was not putting up walls, not running away from me. She was in a good position to teach me. Perhaps to suggest that truth and right have nothing to arise from but a palimpsest of multiple human errors that have somehow learned about each other.

I’d better say that I’m not at all sure that was a lesson Kit meant to teach or meant me to learn, and not at all sure that I have yet learned it. But I know she asked me the right upsetting question, and that this was good teaching. I got a glimpse of what she was up to.

It was eventually possible for me to pull up stakes and walk away from Bennington. I always visited Kit and Tommy when I came back to Vermont, and always felt welcomed and refreshed. I enjoyed learning about the garden and the gardening and the gardening writing, the aromatic borders and the brown paper bag full of perfect compost. I felt I had left this part of the world in good hands. In particular, I could testify to just how lucky her students are and have been and will be to have crossed paths with her and to have known her and to have known her greeting, her attention, and her acknowledgement of her fellow mortal.

## MARY OLIVER

The best memory of Catharine Osgood Foster is, to me, her own voice, with its intelligence, enthusiasm, and wit — and what I would describe as an almost electrical charge into the subject at hand. All of these attributes, in rare measure, were apparent in her writings, and since I was the recipient of a good number of letters, I thought my task at the luncheon in Kit’s memory very light — I decided to read, to an audience of her friends and familiars, some of her own words. And while I think to hear Kit’s own mind speaking may have sharpened during that hour the sense of loss, it also I hope helped us to weigh again, with acuity, laughter, and real feeling, the remarkable teacher and scholar and friend that Catharine Osgood Foster was and, in memory, still is.

Here are a couple of samples:

Bennington, VT  
6-18-96

Dear Mary,

We hope you and Molly are having a good summer with none of these dreadful storms which have been going around.



Recently I have been dipping into the book by Arthur Power called "Conversation with James Joyce." The passage I read this afternoon was a description that came to him while reading, e.g., the sense of smell as experienced.

When it came to Americans, he said Walt Whitman was the one good one. And his smell was of woods, the forest and wooden cabin. Powers asked him about Thoreau and Joyce said, No, not really American. Too much European influence.

He said he did not like sentimentalists; they all smelled too sweet.

Rather fun to come across, don't you think?

Love to both,  
Kit

(A typical postcard:)

Dear Mary,

Maybe a tetrameter clamps down on you so you have to work harder to dig into it whereas pentameter opens out and lets you in. That's my hunch.

Kit

Sat. 11-26-96

Happy Thanksgiving to Mary and Molly and Ben & Bear.

How was the party with the little Scottie?

Twice last night I woke up reciting "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" and each time I thought a while about the craft of the poem until I fell asleep again.

For instance, the way Frost actually makes one hear silence; from the quietude of the falling snow — and he even refers to the sound...of...downy flake! One hears the pronounced caesuras after each line and between the stanzas down to sleep/sleep, ending with the final sleep, suggesting the utter silence of death.

Along with the sequence of coldness of the frozen lake, sweep of wind to the coldness of the death in final sleep.

Then I fell asleep but luckily did wake up! With no complaint except for a nasty set-back of my eyes, and hence this dreadful hand writing.

Be careful.

Love to you both,  
Kit

## ELIZABETH COLEMAN

I would like first to add my welcome to all of you and my gratitude for your joining us on this most special occasion.

Some of my earliest memories of Bennington are meeting alumni who wanted to know about, talk about and send love to Kit. I kept hearing: "If it hadn't been for Kit Foster I never would..." and then followed the telling of some life-transforming experience — the details remembered with a vividness that was as if it had happened yesterday. Kit's impact on her students was truly extraordinary and they, of course, will pass it on to their own. And her passion for what it meant to teach continued unabated, I can promise you. I thought I knew the limits of that particular passion; I was wrong.

But while I came to know much about Kit as a teacher I knew her best as a student. For years she attended courses that I taught either in the Alumni College or in the college college. Since all of you knew Kit, I need only ask you to imagine what it might be like to have her as a student, and then double it.

We have lost a steadfast friend, a wise advisor and a choice, open mind, a woman where only death could still her eagerness to share what she had deeply thought about and her relentless quest to think yet further. We will all miss her goodness, her brilliance, her great generosity of spirit, her ready humor, her kind and not-so-kind wit, and, above all, her caring and love for all of us.